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Biographic Report

FIDEL CASTRO

THE FIRST YEAR

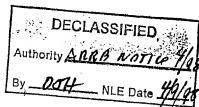


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FILEL CASTRO- THE FIRST YEARThe New Image

The August 1959 edition of the Cuban magazine Bohemia contained a sketch of Premier Fidel Castro which was designed to resemble the traditional religious representations of Jesus Christ. Amid glowing words of praise for the Cuban leader, the accompanying article referred to him as "Jesus Christ in Body" and "the redeemer and catalyst of the people's faith." Although this extravagantly overstated the case, Castro has taken Cuba by storm. His source of power probably reverts to Latin traditions of loyalty to an individual leader, but no single leader in recent Latin American history has come to power with the widespread appeal that Castro seems to have for his people. Starved for a chief with Castro's imaginative appeal, the people have rallied behind this romantic, swashbuckling hero, with a flair for the dramatic, who has a background of imprisonment, jungle combat, and a personal military victory over a hated despot.

A recurrent theme in the public utterances of Fidel Castro has been the monolithic character of his "Revolution," which is supposedly representative of the highest aspirations of the Cuban people. Although the political power of the masses has been channeled in favor of the Revolution and the "Supreme Leader," the government maintains that it speaks for the people and will continue in power "as long as the people want it." In the tumultuous aftermath of the bloody struggle against General Fulgencio Batista, the government of Cuba became the government of Fidel Castro, and historical precedent would indicate that this was inevitable. To a great extent, however, Castro's role was thrust upon him by his fellow Cubans who established him as the embodiment of the revolutionary ideals and the fountainhead of all political activity. In this situation, the government takes its mandate from the Revolution whose aims are interpreted on an ad hoc basis by Fidel Castro.

Traditionally, election to public office in Cuba was a license for corruption and venality on the part of the politicians. Whenever the economic pinch was sufficiently strong, a spirit of revolt could easily be stirred with promises of betterment of the common lot. The obvious excesses of the Batista regime and the failure of the average Cuban to improve his economic and social position in the midst of prosperity led to a crescendo of violence during Castro's revolution. Upon his assumption of power, Castro attempted to sublimate this spirit of revolt through the creation

of a symbol of hope for his people. Cognizant of the fact that destitute people will gamble on any chance of realizing their dreams, his regime has successfully stimulated the people's expectations for future gains. The masses have been receptive to these promises of a bright future for themselves and their children, but their aroused desires and volatile emotions must be met and satisfied to some degree.

While facing difficult domestic problems in meeting the urgent demands of his followers, Castro has created a new image of Cuba in the minds of the people. Taking up the battle cry of "Cuba Libre," he has boasted that "here the foreign masters are through forever." Using ultranationalistic demagoguery, Castro has assumed the leadership of the anti-United States chorus in Latin America and has sought to create a new role for Cuba in world affairs. Never before has Cuba commanded so much attention on the world scene, and the Cuban leader takes considerable pains to impress this fact upon his public. The little island now has a "big Revolution," and is no longer "the little person" living under the shadow of the United States.

Since the founding of the Cuban Republic, in 1898, revolutionaries have used the rallying cry of "Yankee imperialism." Although there has been a significant shift of the island's sugar production ownership from the United States to Cuba, U.S. business interests have been consistently blamed for Cuba's economic ills. The ill-starred Platt Amendment which was in effect from 1901 to 1934, fostered an attitude in Cuba that "big brother will look after us." However, the mere suggestion of U.S. concern with the protection of its interests immediately arouses local sensibilities and provokes a cry of "intervention."

To create a new image of Cuba, the Castro regime has declared that modern Cuban history must be reinterpreted to provide "a true picture" of the influence of the United States. This new historical elucidation pictures Cuba as a victim of U.S. influence, our "useless" intervention in 1898 having brought only "economic vassalage" under "carpetbaggers and servile Cubans." It is interesting to note that Castro's father was reportedly opposed to U.S. intervention in Cuba in 1898. He opted for Spanish rather than Cuban nationality in 1899 when the opportunity was presented to do so and blamed the United States for permitting Cuba to gain independence from Spain.

The Supreme Leader

Born of a well-to-do middle class family which had risen from the ranks of the peasantry, Fidel Castro became a professional



revolutionary seeking a new social order. In his denunciations of the privileged classes and the old established order there is a spirit of atonement which is reminiscent of the "conscience-stricken gentlemen" of Russia during the 19th century. The British historian Sir John Maynard has characterized these people as "men of sensitive conscience and injured pride, men of compassion convinced of Russia's mission to all mankind." "There is," he added, "the sense of sin and the passion for expiation, and moral austerity and the readiness for martyrdom."

The complex personality of Fidel Castro is made up of several of these elements. There is every reason to believe that he is sincerely concerned with the problem of raising the living standards of millions of Cuban peasants who have lived under a near-feudal economy. However improper his methods may be in bringing social justice to his country, he has pursued this goal relentlessly. Personally a man of rather austere tastes, he has insisted upon scrupulous honesty in the conduct of governmental affairs.

In sharp contrast with the Hamlets of 19th century Russia, Castro is a man of action with a typical Latin temperament, and a fervent apostle of a program with particular appeal to the youth of his country. Although he is an idealist, the driving force behind him is an all-consuming ambition for power and glory. Before the establishment of his regime, several of his conservative advisers assumed that his reforms would be carried out over a period of many years, but they had not reckoned with the restless dynamism of the Cuban leader. His youthful impatience sees a continual race against time in achieving the goals set for himself and the Revolution. In the flurry of activity Castro's life is divided not into days and nights but into periods of exhausting activity, regardless of the place and hour. In addition to being consumed by this sense of urgency, he is obsessed with the concept of a continuing revolution in view of his expressed fears that Cubans tend to lose interest and become disheartened in political affairs.

Having spent most of his adult life in revolutionary activities, Castro does tend toward anarchistic principles. He has an inherent distrust of all politicians and an abiding hatred for the military. Since the Cuban Army had allegedly been used to "exploit and oppress" the people it had to be replaced by citizens' militias wherein the "people" constitute the army. Elaborating on an expression of Abraham Lincoln, the Cuban leader proclaimed in July 1959 that his regime was "a government of the people, not of a privileged group; a government by the people, not an oligarchy; a government for the people, not for politicians or military people." In an effort to redress the grievances of his people, Castro has

insisted upon a complete break with the past and the elimination or drastic alteration of existing institutions. In his view, "The country is changing from one stage to another; the old ideas and the old customs must be discarded or the forward march of the Revolution will be retarded."

In an impassioned speech on July 18, 1959, Castro avowed that he was "against any theatrical or dramatic action." During his career in office, however, he has continually engaged in melodramatics to elicit desired responses from his public. Following a July 1959 dispute with Manuel Urrutia, then President of Cuba, Castro employed the time-worn ruse of temporarily resigning from his post as Prime Minister while excoriating his opponents. Occasionally he has made a dramatic appearance before his public by descending from the sky in a helicopter, carrying a sub-machine gun. The beard and the gold religious medal prominently worn around his neck presumably also appeal to his sense of the dramatic, and they have the additional value of providing close identification with the masses.

Undoubtedly, Castro's most effective weapons have been his lengthy harangues before the crowd and his exhausting television appearances. A husky, olive-skinned individual, over 6 feet in height with a full, heavy face and a scraggly beard, he is usually seen dressed in a rumpled fatigue uniform, waving his ever-present cigar, and radiating boundless energy. The fact that he is not conventionally Latin in appearance sets him off from the crowds around him and engenders further respect. Selecting ideas that the masses are easily for or against, Castro speaks in staccato fashion with an incessant flow of words. His mesmerizing effect on his listeners may be partly due to the fact that he says what his audience wants to hear, using mannerisms which endear him to his public. He postures with his body, gesticulates with broad movements, and sometimes laughs a great deal. Some observers suspect that new policies are formulated during these lengthy public appearances, his fertile mind grasping a new idea and translating it into an official pronouncement without prior consultation with his advisers.

Castro has an eclectic philosophy, but he lacks intellectual maturity and ideological discipline. He claims the Cuban national hero, José Martí, as the ideological forebear of his revolution and has expressed admiration for Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. During his student days he learned history and Thomist philosophy from the Jesuits, which may account for his alleged admiration of French Catholic Philosopher Jacques Maritain. In law school Castro came under the influence of liberal thinkers

like José Miró Cardona, who has served as Prime Minister and Ambassador to Spain under the Castro regime. Miró Cardona has characterized his former pupil as an "idea man" who needs competent economic advisers around him to put his ideas into practice.

A vain egocentric with a decided messianic complex which some observers believe borders on paranoia, Castro apparently possesses an "Achilles heel" in his extreme sensitivity. Never content with a subordinate position, he seeks a primary role for himself and his country. On one occasion he reportedly favored the construction of a 35-story apartment building in Habana, but ordered a much higher structure when he learned that there was a 43-story building in Brazil. Although he probably enjoys the firm support of from 60 to 80 percent of his people, he sees himself as the leader of a pure crusade surrounded on all sides by forces of darkness bent on the destruction of the revolutionary ideal.

With his abiding faith in the righteousness of his cause and his program, Castro refuses to accept any criticism and reacts violently against it. A former classmate once observed that, during his university days, Fidel generally tried to force his opinions upon an entire group rather than accept other points of view or attempt to mediate and conciliate disputes between various factions. On the domestic scene, his critics are met with the charge of "treason" or "counter-revolution." Some are referred to as persons "who lived at the expense of the people and contrary to the honor of the nation." He has promoted class warfare in his attacks on "the privileged classes" who, he says, gave only token assistance to the Revolution and "now spend their time going from canasta game to canasta game."

Soon after assuming power in Cuba, Castro declared that the "most dangerous potential enemies of the successful revolution are the revolutionaries themselves." He has dealt ruthlessly with all dissident voices in his coterie, including President Urrutia and Major Huber Matos the highly regarded military leader of Camaguey Province. The latter's ideological differences with Castro led to his trial and conviction in December 1959. Matos and others have expressed fears of Communist infiltration of the revolutionary ranks, but charges of Communism are anathema to Castro, who tends to equate anti-Communists with "reactionaries." In a seven-hour harangue at the Matos trial, the Cuban leader castigated anti-Communist critics as "enemies who seek to divide, weaken and defeat the Revolution." When two Cuban priests fled the country in December 1959, accusing the government of being Communist, Castro referred to them as "priests of reaction and not priests of Christ." The word "Communist" has lost much of its meaning for many Cubans

because of the pronounced tendency of the Batista regime to label its opponents categorically as Communists. In view of this fact, Castro has had some success in convincing the public that accusations that his regime is Communist are "counter-revolutionary" in origin.

Castro has a deep-rooted suspicion and distrust of what he calls "the international oligarchy," by which he means capitalism, the wealthy, and the United States. Although he professes admiration and friendship for the American people, his vicious attacks on the United States Government, business interests, and the press have steadily increased during his first year in office. In Castro's view, the international press is good when he and his Revolution are favorably received but evil when it criticizes him. He entered office with considerable resentment against the United States, which he alleged had supported Batista "with bombs and tanks." U.S. criticism of the execution of so-called war criminals and the flagrant seizure of American property merely reinforced Castro's anti-American bias. The defection of former Cuban Air Force Chief Pedro Díaz Lanz, who testified before a U.S. congressional committee, led to further castigation of American "reactionaries." U.S. relations with Cuba, he complained, had followed "the law of the funnel—the wide end for them and the narrow end for us." His pride hurt by the ever-mounting criticism in the United States, both official and in the press, Castro refused to play the role of the prodigal son, declaring that any change in policy to improve relations must come from the United States as Cuba had nothing to rectify.

The Social Revolution

It is a political truism that revolutionary governments generally tend toward the left in the initial stages after accession to power. With his ambitious dreams for industrialization, public works, agrarian reform and other measures, Castro has moved steadily toward the creation of a state-directed, socialist economy. His eclectic doctrine of "humanism" is described as neither "capitalist nor Communist" but rather a system based on "scrupulous respect for all individual human rights, including the right to work and to be well fed." According to Castro, Communism "gives you food without liberty" while capitalism "gives you liberty and starves you to death."

In the Cuban leader's attempts to break the capitalist system of the past, the economy of Cuba has come under the direct control of the Central Planning Board and the Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA). The controversial agrarian reform program is



paramount in Castro's plan for altering customs as well as political and psychological attitudes in Cuba. When he assumed the office of Prime Minister in February 1959, Castro promised that he would raise the standard of living in rural communities from 500 to 600 percent, to a point where "in a few years" it would exceed that of the United States or the U.S.S.R. Agrarian reform, therefore, takes precedence over all other considerations, including the establishment of machinery for holding elections which, he says, "constitute inhibition and distraction." Political institutions can only be established, in Castro's view, when "there is not a single peasant without land, and unemployment, illiteracy and other problems have been obliterated." At the inception of the agrarian reform program, he warned that failure to carry out his policies would result in "defeat" for Cuba and that the country would be "sunk in misery, in ruin, in anarchy, and in blood." Castro admitted that the program was radical but assured his people that it would not "damage many interests," but that it would "damage powerful interests, inside and outside of the country."

Castro's rationale for his agrarian reform program has been stated on numerous occasions since he began his Revolution, and it is typical of utopian, nationalistic concepts engendered in many underdeveloped areas of the world. In his view, the major economic problem in Cuba is unemployment, which can be alleviated only through rapid industrialization. Since industrialization depends upon the development of an internal market, the purchasing power of the great mass of Cuban farmers must be stimulated. The farmers have allegedly been denied access to the land because of the existence of huge landed estates and, therefore, have no money to spend. Castro proposes to alter this situation by resettling 200,000 agricultural workers on confiscated land where they can begin to produce. As a further incentive to industrial expansion, he intends to spur demand for local products through the creation of tariff barriers.

In practice, the Agrarian Reform Law brought about precipitate, uncompensated displacement of private ownership of agricultural lands under the direction of INRA, which is a state within a state. Property rights were withheld from the new small landholders, and land distribution was generally put into the hands of cooperatives established by and responsible to INRA. Various agricultural products have been marketed by INRA, and officials have begun to establish so-called People's Stores.

This sweeping program, (which may in time plunge Cuban agriculture into chaos and lead the country to the brink of financial ruin), has been conceived and administered by a group of

inexperienced young men who are loyal to the "Supreme Leader." Observers believe that many of the more radical features of these reforms were the result of Castro's increasing dependence upon the advice and support of extreme leftist elements, including Communists. Although such close associates as Ernesto (Ché) Guevara, Míñez Jiménez, and Raúl Castro may not be Communist party members, they are certainly extreme leftists sympathetic to Communism who have been instrumental in fostering syndicalist policies such as the establishment of land cooperatives and cooperative management of industries. Castro is a brilliant politico-revolutionary and innovator, but he is not a capable administrator and has failed to exercise sufficient control over the actions of his advisers. He is apparently convinced that he is master in his own house, and that while using the Communists, he can destroy their influence when it is politically expedient to do so. Some doubt exists whether Castro would recognize a Communist if he encountered one. Like all revolutionaries, the Cuban leader has been attracted to leftist ideas and their proponents, who have lost no opportunity to infiltrate the ranks of his government while proclaiming their devotion to the Revolution. Moderate elements have found that the major stumbling block in gaining real influence over Castro is the mystique of the Sierra Maestra which binds the revolutionaries together. He instinctively seeks the opinions and esteem of a few close comrades like Guevara who shared with him the difficult years of struggle against Batista, and in many ways he reflects the image of these men.

In the aftermath of a world tour by Guevara during the summer of 1959, Cuba suddenly announced that she was seeking to foster a "third force" in the world. This policy was allegedly formulated, in part, by Guevara on the basis of his contacts with Yugoslavia's Marshal Josip Bruz Tito and with Asian neutralists during his trip. Cuban Foreign Minister Raúl Roa, in a speech before the United Nations in September 1959, stated that this third force, "which has greater moral than material strength," would serve as a bridge between the "two armed camps" of the United States and the Soviet Union. Castro regards this concept as a means of projecting himself on the world scene, and intends to use his new ties with the so-called underdeveloped countries as a bulwark against any action which the United States might take against Cuban excesses. He fears "another Guatemala" in his country as criticism mounts against the incursions of Communist elements in his government. In addition to these considerations, Castro has made sweeping claims of greatly increased trade with the underdeveloped nations.

In numerous chauvinistic outbursts, Castro has proclaimed the "independent" nature of his new foreign policy which he says, seeks "friendly relations with all countries that are friendly and do not



represent a threat to the Cuban people and Cuban sovereignty." He sees this new independent policy as a model for all Latin America, which he seeks to unite in opposition to what he calls "the international oligarchy." Having established himself as the modern José Martí of Cuba he now sees himself as a latter-day Simón Bolívar. He is so vaingloriously obsessed with the "purity" of his Revolution that he stated on one occasion that if he failed, the democratic trend in all Latin America would also fail.

By trying to align the nations of Latin America with his so-called "third force," Castro has consistently sought to isolate the United States from the rest of the hemisphere. The "Supreme Leader" and his brother Raúl have publicly ridiculed the Organization of American States. At the same time, they refer to their Revolution as an inspiration and example for the other peoples of the hemisphere, while advocating the "international solidarity of peoples" of Latin America in much the same manner as the Afro-Asians have expressed their solidarity at Afro-Asian Congresses. During 1959, several revolutionary expeditions, to Panama, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, were fostered by the regime in an apparent effort to create revolutionary governments in the Cuban image. Through visits by Cuban functionaries and a series of popular congresses, the Castro regime also attempted to elicit the support of "the people" throughout Latin America.

Portrait of the Revolutionary as a Young Man

Angel Castro was a poor Spanish immigrant who became one of the largest sugar growers in the vicinity of the town of Marcaná in Oriente Province. He married a young woman from a good family in Santiago, but later reportedly lived with a servant named Lina Ruz who worked in his household. Six children were produced from this relationship, including Fidel Castro Ruz, the second son, born on August 18, 1926. Fidel and his two brothers and three sisters were later legitimated when Angel Castro divorced his wife and married Lina Ruz.

An extremely intelligent boy who displayed outstanding leadership qualities at an early age, Fidel Castro was reputedly one of the most brilliant students ever to attend the Jesuit Colegio Belén in Santiago. He was a natural athlete and before entering the university became interested in major league baseball career, but soon abandoned the idea. At the University of Habana, where he obtained a law degree in 1950, Castro was active in student politics as president of his law school class and participated in the plots of various student terrorist groups. He was arrested on several occasions for complicity in murders perpetrated by the terrorist

organization Unión Insurreccional Revolucionaria (UIR). In 1947 he took part in an abortive invasion of the Dominican Republic, and when the Cuban Government ordered the arrest of the participants, he jumped from the invasion craft and swam ashore through three miles of shark-infested waters. Castro reportedly joined a Communist student group at the University of Habana, under the tutelage of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez (present editor of the Communist newspaper Hoy), but soon thereafter became an active member of the Partido del Pueblo Cubano Ortodoxo (Cuban Peoples' Party--PPCO) of Eduardo (Eddy) Chibás.

In April 1948, Castro was designated by the University Student Federation (FEU) to attend a Communist-inspired student congress in Bogotá, Colombia. It has been alleged that there he participated in the bloody "Bogotazo" riots which followed the assassination of a controversial Colombian politician, and in which the Communists took part. Castro denies participation in the violence and maintains that he attended the student congress only in the role of an observer. He was forced to seek asylum in the Cuban Embassy, however, before his repatriation. A 1948 report from the U.S. Embassy in Habana characterized the young revolutionary as "a typical example of a young Cuban of good background who because of the lack of parental control or real education may soon become a full-fledged gangster."

During this hectic period in his life, Castro married Mirta Díaz Balart, the daughter of a political associate of Fulgencio Batista. This ill-fated marriage between the confirmed revolutionary and a young woman from a wealthy family of more conventional political persuasion ended in divorce after five years of hand-to-mouth existence, during which the wife endured continued neglect by Castro. Fidel Jr., the son who was born of this union, was later the subject of a custody dispute between his parents, although his father had previously abandoned him to engage in his revolutionary activity. In 1956, Mirta married Emilio Núñez Blanco, son of Emilio Núñez Portuondo, who was at that time Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations and is now militantly anti-Castro.

After leaving the university, Castro established a modest law practice in which he spent much of his time defending the poor in minor litigations. He ran for a legislative seat on the PPCO ticket in the 1952 elections and conducted a strong campaign against the administration of Carlos Prío Socarrás. Batista took over the government with a coup d'état in March 1952 and Castro began his long, violent struggle against the Cuban dictator. Failing to gain sufficient stature in other opposition movements, Castro formed a movement of his own in association with elements from the university and the PPCO. A plan of action was finally developed and,



in the midst of carnival activities on July 26, 1953, Castro and his associates, dressed in army uniforms, attacked the Moncada Barracks in Oriente Province. This ill-conceived plan ended in a disastrous slaughter from which Castro and only a few others escaped. He was later taken into custody after the Archbishop of Santiago had succeeded in eliciting promises that he and several companions would not face reprisals. At his trial in October 1953, Castro acted as defense counsel for himself and his 19-year-old brother Raúl and delivered a fiery, unrepentant speech against tyranny which ended with the ringing declaration: "Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me." The court responded with a sentence of 15 years' imprisonment, but Castro and his fellow conspirators were pardoned in a general amnesty declared by Batista in May 1954.

Martyr or Hero

After several months in his new role of martyr for democracy, Castro left Cuba for exile in Mexico on July 7, 1954, declaring that the Batista regime had "closed all doors to civic struggle." He entered the United States in October 1955 on an organizational and fund-raising tour for his newly formed "26th of July Movement," which took its name from his abortive 1953 coup. In an interview published in the Cuban magazine Bohemia on November 20, 1955, he claimed 10,000 contributing supporters among Cuban emigrés. At this point, U.S. immigration authorities intervened to limit his stay in this country, and he departed for continued exile in Mexico.

During 1956, Castro made frantic preparations for a final assault against the Batista government while demanding the resignation of the Cuban President. The 26th of July Movement gained numerous adherents in Cuba and Mexico, and a pamphlet containing an August 8, 1955 manifesto of the revolutionaries was circulated. Their announced program included the division of large landed estates, immediate industrialization, nationalization of public utilities, reformation of the fiscal system, and other social reforms. In the wake of charges that members of the movement had Communist ties, Castro and several associates were arrested by the Mexican police on June 29, 1956, for abusing their visitor status in Mexico by plotting against the Cuban Government. It was known that they had established a training center near Mexico City with the assistance of "General" Alberto Bayo Giraud, a former colonel in the Spanish Republican Army. After their release in July 1956, Castro and his associates continued their plotting and, in September, announced an agreement with the Cuban Students' Federation. The moment of decision arrived in November when the revolutionary leader dramatically announced that he would be "either a martyr or a hero" before the end of 1956. Castro came

close to achieving martyrdom when he embarked for Oriente Province in Cuba on December 2, 1956, in a 62-foot diesel yacht, the "Granma," with a force of 82 young men. The craft was spotted by Cuban planes and fewer than 20 men escaped into the Sierra Maestra Mountains.

During the next two years, this small group of insurgents slowly expanded its activities and grew into an effective guerrilla force of several thousand men. Castro's successful defiance of the Cuban Army became a source of great delight to the vast majority of the Cuban public. He was a hero to the young, and his romantic adventures afforded a vicarious pleasure to their elders, including many people from the middle and wealthier classes who contributed generously to his cause. Castro knew that he could not defeat the Cuban Army in a pitched battle, but his frequent sorties and the continued pressure of the dictatorship on the average Cuban resulted in increasing acts of violence and considerable bloodshed throughout the island.

While Castro and the 26th of July Movement were widely revered, there were reports that many people were disturbed by Castro's increasing tendency to adopt the autocratic attitude of a future strong man. The tired and lonely rebel forces became more bitter as the struggle dragged on, and many became highly receptive to leftist blandishments. Most Cubans scoffed at the charges that Communists had infiltrated the rebel ranks. However, several extreme leftists, including Castro's trusted lieutenant, Ché Guevara, won the undying gratitude of Fidel Castro during those difficult days, and their influence became even more important in the years that followed. The revolutionary leader showed considerable disdain for all political figures and arrogantly demanded complete preeminence in all resistance activities, although numerous anti-Batista elements feared that the immaturity and irresponsibility of Castro and his followers would inevitably produce disastrous results.

Despite numerous reverses, including an unsuccessful general strike in April 1958, the handful of rebels in the Sierra Maestra proliferated into other sectors of Oriente and Las Villas Provinces. By the end of 1958, the Cuban sugar crop was in danger and Santa Clara was in the hands of rebel forces. On January 1, 1959, President Batista fled to the Dominican Republic and Fidel Castro was sole master of Cuba.

The Prospects for Equilibrium

Unlike most previous Latin-American revolutions which were designed merely to change leadership, the Cuban revolution sought widespread changes in existing economic and social patterns. It soon became clear that the "Supreme Leader," Fidel Castro, intended

to carry out his reforms without restoring democratic institutions. Although he repeatedly maintained during 1959 that he had "a special interest in demonstrating a total lack of ambition for public posts," he held the reins of power before and after assuming the post of Prime Minister on February 16. Whenever a crisis occurred, he would summon a massive crowd of Cubans into the streets to demonstrate that the will of the people was behind him and constituted the focus of his power. Amid the frenzied cries of the mobs, Castro paraded hundreds of "Batista war criminals" before revolutionary courts on the road to the firing squads. In scenes reminiscent of the "Terror" in France after the French Revolution, "the people" demanded revenge for the years of tyranny under Batista.

Ignoring the stream of hundreds of arbitrary decrees issued by the government, the average Cuban worker and peasant felt that he finally had an honest government with some sympathy for his plight. Land reform decrees and other measures of an increasingly radical nature rapidly brought Cuba under a state-directed socialist economy with authoritarian political controls. After one year in office, the Castro regime has succeeded in silencing many of its critics through thousands of arbitrary arrests, censorship, and continued harassment of any newspaper which dares to criticize the regime. Long a staunch opponent of the armed forces, and perhaps fearing their potential, Castro began deactivating the army. He proclaimed the machete as the symbol of the revolution and created a "people's militia" by arming large groups of Cuban civilians to defend his regime.

Fidel Castro made his first thrust on the international scene in late January 1959 when he journeyed to Caracas and defended his new regime against "slander from foreign news agencies" in the United States. He was received everywhere with wild acclaim and carried the crowds with him in spellbinder fashion as he appealed for Caribbean solidarity. Three months later he visited the United States and made speeches in Washington, New York, and Boston before proceeding to Montreal. The visit was marked by consistent tardiness, disorganization, and frequent changes in plans as he sought to address himself to the people, while ignoring the constituted authorities in the country where he was a guest. After his visit to the United States and Canada, Castro went to Trinidad and finally Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he proposed a 30 billion dollar economic development program for Latin America to be financed by the United States. He defended this proposal on his return to Cuba as "the only solution for Latin American problems" and castigated the United States for its lack of attention to these problems.

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Castro's phobia in regard to any criticism from his associates led to the departure of most of the more moderate elements from his regime during 1959. His temporary resignation from the office of Prime Minister in July was followed by a particularly brutal and ruthless denunciation of President Manuel Urrutia before a demonstration of 500,000 peasants after Urrutia had voiced concern over Communists in the government. The defection of Air Force Chief Pedro Luis Díaz Lanz in June had been a serious blow to revolutionary unity, but a graver crisis arose in October when the respected Major Huber Matos expressed his disillusionment with the "Supreme Leader" and the strong leftist influence of Che Guevara and Raúl Castro. Shortly thereafter, Guevara replaced the well-known economist Felipe Pazos as head of the National Bank. Cuba was now firmly in the hands of the extreme left-wing elements in the government. Oblivious to the fact that he had virtually reached the point of no return in company with Guevara and his brother Raúl, Castro warned "Let the pusillanimous, the vacillators, and fainthearted, the cowards renounce and get out; nothing is going to stop the irresistible force of the Revolution backed by a people who are prepared to sacrifice all for it."

As Fidel Castro entered his second year in office, many observers began to question whether his government would find a point of equilibrium. Most of the promised reforms have been instituted, and the artificially stimulated economy has brought a slight, temporary improvement in living standards. A bountiful sugar crop in 1958 and 1959 has also operated in Castro's favor. Moderates maintain, however, that the average Cuban will soon be faced with an austerity economy or rampant inflation. Castro warned his countrymen in September 1959 that the duty of the worker is to "fulfill the Revolution, the real benefits of which will be enjoyed by your children." The fate of the Castro regime lies in the ability of the "Supreme Leader" to convince his people that his Revolution will eventually fulfill all their aspirations. His hypnotic hold over a considerable segment of the middle class has weakened, but a majority of the population continues to follow him without question.

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March 1960

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